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In Memoriam: Pamela Gilbert (1932–2015)

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Pam Gilbert pictured in the Reading Room of the General Library, Natural History Museum, May 2008 – the "gentle smile … sparkling eyes and … challenging look" still very much in evidence. Tools of the trade include a large lens, and one of those seemingly unique NHM tear-off paper 'book-boards'. [Photograph: Lorraine Portch]

Best wishes for the future. You deserve it for all you have put into life.
Eric Classey, on the occasion of Pam Gilbert's retirement, 1992

Early years

Pamela Gilbert was born at Queen Charlotte's Maternity Hospital, Hammersmith, London, on 14th December 1932, the daughter of Albert Edward Gilbert and Ellen Isabella Gilbert (née Clark). At this time the family were living at 121 Cromwell Road SW7 – only a few hundred metres west of the Natural History Museum, where she later spent all her working life. Today 121 Cromwell Rd looks an imposing address, given that her father is described on the birth certificate as a "general labourer". Pam later recalled her father as a taxi driver; her mother, who died at a relatively young age, had employment as a cook and housekeeper.

By the outbreak of WWII the family were living in the Ladbroke Grove area, near Paddington railway station. They survived the blitz of 1940 but, with the continuing bombing raids, like so many other London children, the following year Pam was 'evacuated' – in her case to Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, a country town about 40 km NE of Bristol. Many evacuees endured a miserable existence, away from family and friends, but Pam remembered this as a happy time – she was placed in the care of a kind family, other children from her part of London were around, she attended a good junior school, and it was her first experience of country living. But by 1944 there was concern regarding her secondary education and she was moved, with many other evacuees, to a special school in the Oxford area.

By the end of the war Pam had rejoined her family, who had moved at some point to the Bounds Green area of North London. Pam completed her secondary education at Trinity County Grammar School, Wood Green, gaining School Certificate qualifications in English (Language and Literature), French, Mathematics, Biology, History, Geography, Shorthand and Typewriting, passing with distinction in French, Biology and Geography, and then gained, at Higher Level, a qualification in Botany.

From part of a photograph available on the Trinity Old Scholars Association website (http://tosa.homestead.com/19496thFormL.html) showing the Trinity School 6th form for 1949–50. Pam, not identified on the website legend, is centre, sitting to the left of a girl identified as Miss Yvette Borrell, and to the right of an unidentified fellow pupil. [Photograph: TOSA, permission applied for]

Entomology at the Natural History Museum

Noting her aptitude for biology, a school careers adviser suggested she try for a post at the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. Apparently, Pam had never heard of the place! But thus encouraged, she applied to become an "Assistant (Scientific)" at what was then officially known as the British Museum (Natural History). So it came to pass that on 1st October 1951, eleven weeks before her 19th birthday, Pam Gilbert started work in the Setting Room – a service unit for the Museum's Department of Entomology that also acted as a training section for new assistants. The Setting Room at that time was managed by S.J. ('Dick') Turpin, also responsible for discipline(!) amongst the junior staff. Duties included learning how to prepare specimens for the collections, slide making, printing labels, looking after and administering departmental stores, packing parcels of insects for the post, and 'Saturday Duty' – a rota requiring two assistants each Saturday to run the Entomology Department enquiry desk, and deliver internal mail throughout the museum as a whole.

New staff spent months, sometimes years in the Setting Room before, typically, being allocated to one of the several taxon-based sections into which the department was divided. In 1954 Pam was assigned to the Diptera Section which, at that time, notably included Paul Freeman, Harold Oldroyd, Peter Mattingly and Ralph Coe but, for various reasons, she was not very happy there. In the following year she was offered the chance of a transfer to one of the Museum's earth science libraries, but declined due to her lack of relevant background. But Pam's direct association with the dipterists was anyway short-lived, as she successfully transferred to the Entomology Library in 1956 "at her own request" (Freeman, memorandum, 9th June 1969). At that time the departmental libraries of the Museum were still under the direct control of the Keepers, the heads of the scientific departments – the Keeper of Entomology in 1956 being W.E. China, successor to the long-serving N.D. Riley.

The Entomology Library

The Department of Entomology (1913–2012) did not take responsibility for the purchase and control of purely entomological publications and library material until 1937. By this time Clarence ('Charlie') Wood was in charge of the Entomology Library, with Bernard Clifton a part-time attendant. At the outbreak of WWII the library was dispersed to How Caple Court, near Ross-on-Wye, and Wray Castle, Ambleside.

In 1946 Bernard Clifton returned from war service and, due to Wood's ill health, gradually took over, by 1949 effectively becoming the Entomology librarian. In February 1952, on final completion of the long delayed Entomology Building (only about half of it had been completed before WWII), the main part of the insect library was relocated on the third floor. Pam Gilbert was appointed Assistant Librarian on 1st October 1956, as the second member of staff, replacing Wood on his retirement.

At the time of her first employment at the Museum, Pam was still living near Bounds Green, but she later moved to the Paddington area, and thus much closer to her work. To become better fitted for her new role, Pam took the First Professional Examination of the Library Association (now 'CILIP'), and then attended their course for Associate status – but did not sit the ALA exam because of a change to full-time attendance as a requirement. Her LA studies were carried out, at least in part, at the North Western Polytechnic in Kentish Town – historically, part of what is now London Metropolitan University. In addition to French, Pam had some German, Russian and Turkish.

In 1974, on Clifton's retirement, Pam became the entomology Librarian. By this time she had been promoted, first to the rank of Senior Scientific Assistant (1960), then Experimental Officer (1st December 1970). Pam remained as head of the Entomology Library until 1991, when she became full-time Deputy Head of the Museum's Department of Library Services, with the grade of Principal Scientific Officer.

By the late 1960s the Entomology Library, which occupied about a quarter of a floor of the Entomology building, was almost literally bursting at the seams. Fortunately there was a plan. By 1972 the Museum's new ornithology building at Tring had been completed, and the very substantial NHM bird collection which at that time occupied much of the three lower floors of Entomology was relocated. In return, up from Tring came the Rothschild Lepidoptera and various other insect collections – but there was still a net gain of space at South Kensington. The adjacent Diptera collections and staff were moved from the 3rd to the 1st floor, allowing the library literally to double in extent. Into this space were packed dozens of new book cases.

So close to his own retirement, Bernard Clifton showed little interest in this development and, perhaps somewhat ungallantly, left all the arrangements to Pam. With little other assistance, Pam set about reorganising the entire library, moving nearly all of the many tons of books herself. A positive outcome was that, as a result, Pam had a wonderful grasp of where all the various volumes and serials were to be found, as she had first allocated all of the spaces, and then moved everything onto the shelves herself.

During her tenure Pam demonstrated not only first-rate librarianship but also, because of her earlier training in entomology alongside professional taxonomists, an excellent understanding of the needs and issues affecting systematic entomology, as it was practised during that period. This, plus her sunny disposition and remarkable patience, meant that she was soon much in demand from staff and visitors alike, gaining a reputation amongst entomologists as "an entomologists' librarian". Pam's special ability was wonderfully recalled at the time of her retirement by the late Vic Eastop who, lamenting, wrote "who will now tell me the author and date of "the small brown (before it was rebound) book with a picture of an aphid gall near the back, that before the library was extended, used to be on the second or third shelf down, in either the fourth or fifth row of book cases to the left of the door as you went in (or perhaps it was as you came out)"?" Pam really could make sense of such enquiries!

Pam also took a great interest in preserving manuscripts and other historical material, difficult "stuff" that entomologists seem able to generate in profusion. Under her guidance and leadership, the Entomology Library was one of the happier and more effective 'engine rooms' of the Museum. It was also a social connection, especially for smokers. Smoking was necessarily strictly forbidden throughout the entomology building, but 'les fumeurs' were allowed to indulge on the roof of the adjacent zoology 'Spirit Building', reached from a door very close to the library. Pam, a moderate smoker herself, often joined these alfresco gatherings, where many things, including museum gossip of course, were discussed.

The Department of Library Services

In 1975 all the Museum's subject libraries were brought together administratively into the Department of Library Services, headed by Librarian Maldwyn Jones ('Mal') Rowlands (1918–1995). Pam also served under the two subsequent head librarians, A.P. ('Tony') Harvey, and then Rex E.R. Banks. It was during Rex's tenure (1988–1996) that Pam was promoted, initially part-time, to Deputy Librarian. Pam's working relationship with Rex evolved into a lasting friendship. Well into retirement they used to meet at least once a year for a pub lunch in Westerham, Kent, a small town half

way between their respective homes – and this only ceased as Pam's lack of mobility due to arthritis worsened to the point where walking even a short distance had become just too painful to bear.

A key feature of the period when Pam was Deputy was the introduction of a large scale photocopying service that benefited an international research community. Before the era of the internet and electronic scanning, the only means of making available the content of antiquarian books and difficult to locate scientific journals and books to researchers who could not travel to specialist libraries, was to produce photocopies, sent by post. The Natural History Museum library during the 1980s and early 90s processed many thousands of such photocopy requests, with individual orders often listing hundreds of references. This major logistical challenge to library staff, checking and locating often obscure references, collating large orders and posting parcels to all parts of the world, was calmly managed by Pam. Many natural history books and papers published during this time fully acknowledge the important contribution of this photocopy service. In the late 1980s Pam was also instrumental in recognising that the library would need to adopt computer technology and, together with Rex Banks, they organised the scanning and transcription of hundreds of thousands of library catalogue cards into the first library database. This provided the foundation of the current on-line library catalogue which now benefits thousands of users every day via the internet.

Although the Natural History Museum, its libraries and their users were the core of Pam's professional life, it would be wrong to give the impression that her work was limited entirely to South Kensington. At various times Pam acted as Secretary to the ASLIB Biological Group, attended ASLIB conferences, and was a member of the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries (now the *Society of College, National and University Libraries*). Her involvement with various joint NHM, Hill House and Nokomis facsimile projects took her to Singapore and Australia, and she also visited Japan. Even so, there is no doubt that her focus was always very much in the Cromwell Road.

Group photograph, NHM Department of Library Services staff, *circa* 1980, taken on the steps of the Main Hall of the 1881 Waterhouse Building. In the centre of the front row, immediately to Pam's resplendent left is Tony Harvey (glasses), then Mal Rowlands (tallest), and Rex Banks (chequered tie). Immediately behind Pam, just slightly to her left, is Cindy Cogan. [Photograph: NHM London]

Publications

A group of entomologists with whom Pam developed particular rapport were members of the European lepidopterological union, Societas Europaea Lepidopterologica (SEL), a new society founded in Bonn in 1977. Starting the following year, Pam made 13 major contributions to SEL journals. These were annual bibliographical lists (sometimes with supplements) of publications on Lepidoptera that had appeared in Europe, or were relevant to the European fauna. In all cases Pam acted as editor, but also as a contributor. All were published under the rubric 'Bibliography of Palaearctic Lepidoptera', but in four different "series":

The first two (1978, 1979), for which Pam formally appeared as author, were published as papers in the Society's main journal, *Nota Lepidopterologica*. But from 1982, when the third part appeared, covering 1979–80, these bibliographies became the subject of a separate, more cheaply produced SEL serial – which had its formal title changed twice during Pam's involvement. In all these subsequent publications Pam was formally both Editor and one of the collective contributors. The seven annual parts published 1982–1988 appeared as *Bibliographia Europaea Lepidopterologica*, part 10 (in 1989) as *Bibliographica Palaearctica Lepidopterologica*, and the last three parts (1990–1992) as the eponymous *Bibliography of Palaearctic Lepidoptera*. These 13 bibliographic contributions under Pam's editorship amounted in total to 792 pages, listing approximately 10,000 references, and undoubtedly did much to foster and strengthen the nascent society. On reaching retirement, Pam stepped down as editor, and the series then underwent another metamorphosis, to become the *Index of Publications on European Lepidoptera* (which first appeared in 1995, for the years 1991–1992, numbered as part 14). Harald Schreiber has given a historical account of Pam's important contribution to the Society (*Societas Europaea Lepidopterologica (SEL) News – Nachrichten – Nouvelles* (43): pp.10,15,16, 2007). Pam was elected an Honorary Member of SEL in 1988.

Pam also co-authored a valuable source book for general entomology (Gilbert and Hamilton 1983, updated 1990), and a key work on manuscripts held in the library of the Natural History Museum London (Harvey, Gilbert and Martin 1996). However, remarkably, she is best known for her very first publication – *A Compendium of the Biographical Literature on Deceased Entomologists* (1978) and its continuation 30 years later, the companion volume *A Source Book for Biographical Literature on Entomologists* (2007).

What was initially "The biographical index of entomologists" was the subject of a publication proposal dated 29th June 1973 by David Ragge, then Deputy Keeper of Entomology at the NHM, at which time the book was expected to have 6500 entries and 14000 references. To commence your publication career at over 40 years of age with something so ambitious is surely most unusual – and fraught with academic danger. Such works, almost all 'data' and very little interpretation, are always subject to errors and omissions – and when first published, the work received various criticisms. Some were speculative. Thus Harold Oldroyd (*Journal of Natural History* 13(1): 122, 1979) wondered why two dipterists of interest to him, J.M.R. Surcouf and Gertrude Ricardo, were missing. Pam's 2007 volume has entries for both – but these were not written until many years after the original *Compendium* appeared! John Clark states that the *Source Book* includes over 8000 entomologists and 21,500 citations (*Archives of Natural History* 37: 181, 2010). The sheer scale of this undertaking is reflected in a personal letter to Pam from Michael Ruijsenaars of Backhuys Publishers, dated 27th November 2007: "With every new book we publish, I always have a sense of gladness … but … with your work, this feeling is considerably more poignant, in the knowledge of the enormous amount of work and time that you have lavished on this production."

A genuine and rather amusing source of error in the *Compendium* concerned the fact that, as Klaus Sattler recalls, "Pam did not [then] appreciate that Eastern European countries in particular often published eulogies to commemorate birthdays or retirements. Pam might have noticed that a surprising number of entomologists had 'died' on their 60th birthday … I myself knew four people who survived their 'death' by a good many years!" But in the total scheme of things such errors are mere peccadilloes. That these works remain so tremendously useful and so widely used, as Klaus observes, is testimony to their author's remarkable vision, tenacity and ability.

PAM, HAT, OBE, HM (1992: photographer unknown)

Retirement

Pam officially retired from the museum on 13th December 1992. Earlier that year she had been honoured in the Queen's Birthday Honours list with an OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire), announced in the *London Gazette* on 12th June. Some years earlier Pam had moved south of the river to the Croydon area, good for commuting by rail. But after retirement she relocated even further south, to Warlingham, a leafy, outer London suburb set amongst the North Downs. By this time she had learned to drive, and would set out in her little car soon after 5 am to make the 25 km journey to South Kensington. Arriving by 6.30 she became very well-known to museum security staff. This remarkable strategy for someone supposedly in retirement enabled her to produce several more publications, some of them very substantial (see Bibliography).

Due to her increasing mobility problems, as the years passed, Pam's visits to Cromwell Road became less frequent. Her general health started to deteriorate, but she was still absolutely determined to pursue her bibliographical endeavours. In the end only the car made this possible, reducing painful walking to an absolute minimum. Although her last recorded publication appeared in 2012, she continued working to the very end, most notably transcribing the correspondence of the 18th century silversmith and entomologist Dru Drury. Pam died shortly before her 83rd birthday, on 8th December 2015, at Redhill, Surrey.

Retirement: Pam at home [Photograph: Noleen Glavish]

Memories and Reflections

At the time of her retirement, Laurence Mound, then Keeper of Entomology, wrote of Pam: "To me you have always epitomised the Natural History Museum – outstanding scholarship, worn lightly and with unfailing courtesy and humour, but with clarity of purpose and determination. Sharing your career has given me much inspiration, enlightenment – and sheer pleasure". Memoranda in the Museum's archives from the period of her first establishment as Entomology Librarian, notably by Turpin, Clifton, China, Riley and Freeman, reveal that Pam was always regarded in the same positive light by her colleagues.

Thus, in support of her promotion from Senior Scientific Assistant to Experimental Officer (for an insight into the structure of UK civil service science at that period, see *Science* 124(3222): 567–571, 1956), Paul Freeman wrote to the Museum Director on 9th June 1969: "Miss Gilbert is an educated, intelligent woman, well up to E.O. standard, conscientious in her work and has been a great asset to the smooth running of the Library … She is particularly noted for the helpful way in which she will go to endless trouble to assist enquirers, regardless of their rank and has shown considerable skill at times in handling what could be difficult cases". Proof that Pam never lost this skill comes from a recent email by one of those many "enquirers", the extraordinary Australian lepidopterist and publisher Bernard d'Abrera:

"Thank you for the most important item of news regarding the passing of our great mutual colleague, Pamela Gilbert OBE. What a magnificent person she was, both professionally and socially. I never once saw her lose her temper or be ungracious to anyone. I've seen her provoked

beyond human endurance, and every time there was this gentle smile, followed by that famous deep baritone chuckle. The sparkling eyes and the challenging look which made the offender feel gently but firmly corrected – I was one of them on several occasions when I pushed my luck a little too far. She never once denied me any assistance that I might have sought, and was always on hand to guide and help through several of my seemingly outrageous projects." [Bernard d'Abrera, in litt., 2016.]

And it was through the d'Abrera connection that Pam first met Noleen Glavish, when she travelled to Melbourne for the launch of the Hill House Banks/Cook Portfolio (Gilbert, ed., 1990). As Noleen recalls, "Pam and I became instant friends when we met. She stayed at my house during that visit. I later visited London three times during the following four years and stayed with Pam – and we dug out the Bauer Collection. But as time went on my relationship with Pam was not so much business but a friendship, and I always visited her and often stayed at her house after Nokomis published the Ferdinand Bauer Collection prints in 1994. We used to sit for hours far into the night talking about all manner of things. If I hadn't met Pam I wouldn't be publishing today – she was the driving force that got me to publish the Bauer Collection and it moved on from there. So I owe her a great deal."

Cindy Cogan, who worked in the Entomology Library at the end of the 1960s, recalls Pam thus: "I had been working on the Coleoptera Section for three years and I had to go to the Library to sort out a map reference. Pam passed by and just asked if I had found what I was looking for and we started to chat. I commented that I was a bit fed up with my current job and later, due to Pam's recommendation, I was offered a post in the Entomology Library. She was my boss for two years, and taught me everything I needed to know to enable me to survive the everyday functioning of a specialist library. She created a happy atmosphere and we worked together as a team. Pam was very generous and at Christmas she would take me out for a meal. She had a great sense of humour and we were always laughing, and she could always see the funny side of the absurd. During the dreaded 'book checks' she was often to be seen up the ladders, sharing all the work, and never made me feel that I was only her assistant. Whenever I came back from leave, I found that most of my everyday work had been kept up-to-date and I was not greeted by a desk piled so high that I didn't know where to start. Pam was also a great cook, and when we organised leaving parties it was always great fun, as she made the best sausage rolls I've ever tasted! I'm so glad that I knew Pam and shared part of my life with her." Cakes were also a speciality – so much so that Krystyna Plater recently referred to these works of culinary art as "Pamtastic!"

Indeed, Pam Gilbert was a truly fantastic colleague, one of the very best, and her passing is mourned not only by numerous present and previous museum staff, but literally thousands of visitors to the museum who had need, reason or desire to access the Museum's entomological library, or better understand the literature of natural history.

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